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The End of the “Golden Years”: Jewish Life in Saint John in the 1960s

In her book *Weaving the Past Into the Present* (1989, 2008), Marcia Koven wrote:

The 1960s saw the congregation “peak” both in numbers and in activities. Many professionals moved to the city and involved themselves in all community activities. Several groups flourished: a choir under the direction of Doug Major; a theatre group under the direction of Dr. Moe Polowin; a very active scout troop which saw several boys become Queen Scouts ...and Young Judaea had one of the most active centres in Canada. ... Attendance at services was at an all time high and children attended a Junior Congregation on a regular basis as part of the Hebrew School curriculum. There was a spirit of fellowship and excitement pervading the community ... but, unfortunately, was not to last much longer.

Affluence for many families now allowed more of the children of the 1960s to attend university ... Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and Halifax now became the beneficiary of our lifeblood, and in most cases the children were never to return to the city of their birth except for brief holidays. Now the community began to go into a decline through attrition. Many members died, while some families moved to wherever their children decided to settle.

The 1960s in Saint John marked the final decade of the “Golden Years” for the Jewish community. An examination of the minutes and reports of the Congregation Shaarei Zedek and community organizations reveal some of the challenges and transformations taking place.

The most serious challenge the community faced was a large debt incurred by the modernization of the synagogue building, including construction of a new meat kitchen off the vestry. Abram I. Garson had offered 300 theatre seats for the main sanctuary in April 1961, along with \$9 000 worth of Israel Bonds to assist with the costs of purchasing and installing the seats in memory of his late wife, Bertha. Further improvements to the vestry were undertaken in the mid-1960s and dedicated in memory of Mr. Garson. To help pay for these debts and on-going building upgrades, all members were urged to make pledges to a building campaign. The financial situation placed great stress on the position of congregation president and the 1961 Annual General Meeting concluded without the election of a president. An Emergency Community Committee was put in place to maintain the congregation’s business through 1962. Approximately 150 members were asked to pay increased dues to eliminate debts and provide salaries for officials to lead religious services, but not all were willing to shoulder this burden. The congregation persevered and by the end of 1969, the annual financial report noted that the finances were in good shape.



Congregation Board, 1967-1968.

Throughout the 1960s, the congregation minutes regularly lamented the poor turnout for weekday (Monday and Thursday) and Sabbath services, although attendance was much higher for Holy Day services. Attendance, along with the mixed seating plan, complicated the search for and retention of rabbis in Saint John. There were two cantors in the early part of the decade, neither of whom stayed in the city long. They often found themselves at odds with the congregation over their workload, salaries, and vacations. The congregation soon hired two new rabbis. Rabbi Abraham Feffer arrived in 1962 and agreed to a position beginning in August 1963. Philip Hamburg, the Recording Secretary for the Board, detailed the new rabbi's ambitious plans in the August 21, 1963 minutes.

Mr. Isaacs spoke of his conversations with the Rabbi and the Rabbi has made the following recommendations and intended to carry them out starting October 26th. A Tallis and Tephilim breakfast club for the men would be organized for Sunday mornings. An Adult Education group would be formed. A Shallus Shudas would be held at least once a month as well as an Oneg Shabbat. He would like to see Sabbath services start a little earlier. We recommend that Saturday services be no longer than 2 ½ hours. He would like to have contact with all organizations and would like to be on TV. and radio at least once a month. Wants to organize a youth group. Would like confirmation classes once a month. Is going to take charge of Junior Congregation and make it part of the Talmud Torah curriculum. A monthly bulletin would be set up in the charge of Moshe Kotler. He would like to have some secretarial service. He would like to see a *Milchige* [dairy] kitchen and the vestry redecorated to

be more attractive. This would be undertaken with Sisterhood. He would also like a library started. He also requested a day off per week, or else three or four days each month.

Many of these ideas were adopted and enjoyed wide support, but four years later, Rabbi Feffer relayed to the Board his concerns about low attendance at Sabbath services. He suggested that if *minyans* could not be held, he doubted he would stay on. He left the city in July 1967.

The congregation accepted the application of Rabbi Benjamin Eisenberg in July 1967. He was also willing to teach the Hebrew School and candidates for Bar and Bat Mitzvah. At that year's Annual General Meeting it was noted that the new rabbi was an asset to the community. Rabbi Eisenberg remained in Saint John until July 1980.

The number of students in the Hebrew School ranged from a high of 74 children in 1961 to fewer than 40 by the end of the decade. Although it was expected that the cantors and rabbis in the community would teach the children, particularly those preparing for Bar Mitzvahs, the community did hire lay teachers. Moshe and Freda Kotler were hired from 1961 to 1965. After their contract was terminated two new teachers were hired – Michael Givon who stayed for a couple years, and Moshe Granik who taught for more than forty years, until there were no children left to teach.

The Chevra Kadisha regularly requested additional volunteers, particularly to sit with the bodies overnight. In 1967, preparations for burial and the funeral service moved from the community centre and vestry to Castle Funeral Home. This change eliminated the need for sitters.

Other challenges came as families began to leave Saint John for larger cities, some because they could no longer make a living in Saint John. Among these was the last kosher butcher in Saint John, Abraham Newman, who left for New York in 1961. This meant the community needed to turn to the nearby cities of Moncton and Fredericton to determine if their kosher butchers could also supply Saint John families.



Synagogue Balcony.

By 1960, the women of the congregation had moved from separate seating in the balcony to sit with their husbands in the main sanctuary. The Board minutes of April 4, 1961 proposed a new role for the women:

The second item for discussion was the matter of utilizing the talents of our women in running the affairs of the congregation. It was pointed out that in many of today's congregations it was accepted that women should have a place on the Board of Directors and it was felt that Saint John could well follow their example. There was a suggestion that women be appointed by Sisterhood to sit on the Board with voting power. It was felt that the prospect was favourable for the idea. It was therefore moved by A. R. Isaacs, seconded by Lou Citren, that at the next regular meeting of the congregation, a notice of motion will be moved that wives of members in good standing and widowed members of the congregation in good standing be given the privilege of voting and holding office in the Shaarei Zedek and that four female members be elected to the Board of Directors at the next annual meetings and that the number of the members of the Board of Directors be raised to 15.

It was not clear from the Congregation minutes if this was implemented, as the issue was brought up again a few years later.

The Sisterhood president, Marcia Koven, noted in her annual report for 1961-1962 that "we were fortunate in being allowed representation on the Synagogue Board. The President and both Vice-Presidents were invited to all Board meetings. Although most of their agenda did not directly concern the functions of the Sisterhood,

nevertheless we were invited to give a report of our activities at their meetings which certainly pleased us as we felt that we were being recognized as a functioning body of the Synagogue.”

The next mention of including women as members of the Board came on December 27, 1964 in a motion by Lee April “that a representative or representatives of Sisterhood be invited to sit in at Board meetings without voting powers, and as observers, and that they submit their names to the secretary.” This motion passed and three months later, the presence of women was noted among the attendees at the meeting. When the women’s comments were noted, they were usually about education and the cleanliness of the buildings.

Minutes recorded by members of the Sisterhood in the 1960s focused on the activities undertaken to support the children of the Hebrew School, preparation of dinners, and maintaining the cleanliness of the Synagogue and community centre buildings. Members of the organization visited the Hebrew classes on a weekly basis, provided special treats for the children at holiday parties, and assumed leadership in the teaching of the younger children. The women also organized the library under the guidance of Rabbi Feffer and furnished a room in the Community Centre with shelves for the books. The women worked in the kitchen on a regular basis to prepare foods for Kiddush after the services and to prepare dinners for fundraising events. The organization of annual events including a Chanukah Luncheon and dances for Yom Kippur and New Year’s Eve also fell under the management of Sisterhood members. They worked alongside members of Hadassah on thrift shops and art shows and with other Saint John organizations including the Local Council of Women, Canadian Red Cross, Canadian Mental Health Association, and the Young Men’s Christian Association. Sisterhood had more than 130 members in 1960, with the number dropping to fewer than 100 by 1969.

The Saint John Jewish community engaged in prodigious fundraising activities for Israel with at least two major dinner events each year in the 1960s. The Negev Dinners were organized by the Zionist Men’s Organization Ezra Lodge, Youth Aliyah dinners were organized by the Henrietta Szold Chapter of Hadassah, and a joint committee of men and women organized dinners for Israel Bonds. The lists of organizers on the back of the dinner programs suggest that these events involved a significant number of people. The dinners were a means to recognize the contributions of one or more individuals from Saint John. The long lists of pledges suggest there was significant support for causes in Israel. Members of Hadassah organized annual thrift shops, art shows and sales, and published community calendars filled with advertisements for local Jewish businesses and notations of birthdays, anniversaries, and *yahrzeits*.

Another source of information on the activity of the Saint John Jewish Community

is the monthly newsletters mailed to congregants. Each issue included news from the congregation, organizations, and personal news about births, marriages, Bar Mitzvahs, and travels, and forthcoming *yahrzeits* were listed. The front cover was generally set aside for a message from the rabbi of the congregation. These messages were used to reflect on the meanings of holy days and occasionally contained a message to the congregation about their religious responsibilities. The February 1960 message expressed concern that the children of the community were more interested in attending dances at the nearby YMCA than they were in attending activities organized in the synagogue, and lamented the failure of parents who did not enforce attendance at synagogue activities. Under Rabbi Eisenberg, in 1968 and 1969, the messages took on a much lighter tone with stories that reinforced Jewish traditions.

Jewish merchants in the 1960s felt the effects of change in two ways. They had worked hard to send their children to university, but the children did not return to Saint John to carry on the businesses their fathers and grandfathers had built. The other significant change was the redevelopment of the North End of the city. Many family businesses lined both sides of Main Street, some with apartments upstairs where the families lived. The construction of a new bridge to cross the city's harbour and its connections to new highways had a direct impact on some merchants. Many were "forced" out of business or into new locations to make way for the wholesale demolition of the wooden buildings and the creation of a multi-lane roadway to connect the new bridge to the highway. There were at least twenty fewer Jewish merchants in operation by the end of the decade.

The 1960s brought changes to daily life as well. Families moved into new suburbs and housing developments. No longer did they live along the same streets or in the same neighbourhoods as before. Families who had spent decades in Pamdenec, a nearby summer community, sold their cottages. With their children either grown up and gone or choosing to attend Jewish summer camp in Nova Scotia, there seemed to be little point in keeping the cottages.

The community members who recall the 1960s remember them with a fondness. They recall the activities in the synagogue, the stores where they shopped and the friends they had. Although these times have passed into nostalgia, the records of the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum are a tangible reminder that the community faced challenges and change with a determination to survive.

The Jews of Saint John built their community on a foundation of family and religious tradition centred on the synagogue. Those who remain in the city can see the emergence of a new and younger community with the arrival of families from Israel. New traditions are being built on the foundations of the old.